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ABSTRACT

By structuring the manner group members use to reach a decision, managers can affect the processes and outcomes of decision making. Business administration undergraduates (N=78) were randomly assigned to three groups and told to make group decisions based on the process their manager selected, i.e., they were either to seek concurrence, debate opposing views, or express their own views as they made their decisions. During discussion, managers acted as observers rating quality of the decision, acceptance of it, and interpersonal attitudes. Participants also rated the decisions and the group interrelationships. Analyses of results indicated that participants in the controversy condition were uncertain about both their knowledge and the decision, but explored the problem in depth. Participants in the concurrence seeking condition felt confident about their understanding and the decision, though they did not explore the problem fully. They indicated they liked each other and felt their relationship was cooperative. Participants in the consensus condition were more confident about their understanding and decision but did not actually explore the problem as thoroughly as participants in the controversy condition. The findings suggest that controversy generates the greatest problem exploration. (Author/JAC)

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MANAGERIAL DECISION MAKING:

THE EFFECTS OF STRUCTURING CONTROVERSY AND CONSENSUS

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Abstract

Managers can, by structuring the manner group members use to reach a decision, affect the processes and outcomes of decision making. Seventy-eight business administration undergraduates were told to seek concurrence, debate opposing views, or express their own views as they made a decision about a promotion. Participants in the controversy condition were uncertain about their knowledge and the decision and explored the problem in depth. Participants in the concurrence seeking condition felt confident about their understanding and the decision, though they did not explore the problem fully. They indicated they liked each other and felt their relationship was cooperative. Consensus decision making had effects distinct from controversy. Participants in this condition were more confident about their understanding and decision but actually did not explore the problem as thoroughly as participants in the controversy condition.

MANAGERIAL DECISION MAKING:
THE EFFECTS OF STRUCTURING CONTROVERSY AND CONSENSUS

Managers must make decisions about how decisions are to be made. Recent efforts have outlined models to help managers decide who should be involved in making the decision and how the decision should be made (Vroom & Yetton, 1973; Field, 1981; Stumpf, Zand & Freedman, 1979). Largely unspecified in these considerations is the method and approach the manager should encourage the decision makers to use. Vroom and Yetton, for example, suggest that in certain situations managers should have the group as a whole make the decision, but they provide little guidance concerning how managers are to encourage these groups to make the decision. This study empirically examines the effects of a manager's structuring a group to seek concurrence (agreement), express own views fully to reach a decision all can support (consensus), or defend opposing opinions (controversy) on the extent that (a) group members are uncertain about the problem, (b) explore the problem, (c) make a high quality decision that is accepted, and (d) develop favorable interpersonal attitudes.

There is some evidence that groups will tend to be conforming and stifle exploration and creation of new solutions, though groups may facilitate evaluation of alternatives. Groups have been thought to incur "process losses" that make the decision less effective than the resources and ideas of the members would warrant (Rohrbaugh, 1979; 1981).

Managers would appear to be able to affect group processes more than the Vroom and Yetton and the Stumpf et. al. approaches have specified. Groups do not necessarily have to conform and stifle the expression of new and opposing ideas and information. Janis (1972) found that groups that seek concurrence often make ineffective decisions whereas those that challenge present options are able to arrive at useful decisions. Groups

that encourage open controversy may probe ideas deeply, share information, and reach quality decisions (Hall & Williams, 1970; Maier & Hoffman, 1964). It appears controversy creates conceptual conflict in that a person confronts two incompatible ideas. Berlyne (1963, 1965) suggested that internal conflict about which idea is more adequate stimulates epistemic curiousity and a search for more information to resolve the uncertainty. Tjosvold and Johnson (1977, 1978) experimentally found that controversy resulted in uncertainty, a search for information about the other's position and understanding of the reasoning behind the other's opinion. Lack of controversy created a false sense of understanding that masked actual ignorance. Controversy can lead to exploration and exchange of information that facilitates effective decision making (Tjosvold & Dean, 1980).

There are two major alternatives to controversy. The first one is concurrence seeking in which the members try to keep the discussion harmonious and agreeable. The other alternative is consensus seeking in which the members are encouraged to speak their own opinions and to arrive at a decision everyone can support. This study assumes that consensus decision making will be much like concurrence seeking when original positions are apt to be similar. It is hypothesized that controversy creates more uncertainty about the problems, a more thorough analysis, and a higher quality decision than concurrence seeking or consensus.

Method

Participants

Seventy-eight volunteers, recruited from business administration courses, agreed to participate in the experiment. They were randomly assigned to three conditions, 26 in each condition. They were given one chance for a $30 lottery and course credit for participation in the study.

Procedures

Two participants and one confederate (posing as a participant) were scheduled at each session. They were told that the study was designed to examine communication in decision making. The instructions informed them that they would take the role of either members or the manager of the Personnel Office of the Camlie Office Supply Company. They were to make a decision about whether the company should offer one of its secretaries, Vivien Burns, a new position and whether they should encourage her to take this position. How they would make this decision depended upon the process their manager selected. The experimenter returned to answer questions and then a draw occurred that was arranged so that the confederate was always chosen to be the manager. Then the participants were given the case study (taken from Maier 1973, p. 177). The manager then left the room to determine how the participants were to make the decision.

The manager returned, told them they were to make the decisions as a group, and introduced the independent variables. In the concurrence seeking condition, the manager indicated that their office has a history in which

persons discuss decisions in an agreeable, harmonious way, and that the number of chances they would earn for the $30 lottery depended upon their keeping their discussion agreeable and harmonious. They were given rules that they should listen to each other and paraphrase each other's comments, and try to keep the discussion harmonious. For participants in the controversy condition, the manager indicated that the office has a history of discussing decisions in an open, conflictful manner and that they would earn chances for the $30 lottery to the extent they did discuss opposing views openly. One subordinate was assigned to the position that Vivien should be promoted and encouraged to accept the promotion and the other the position that she should not be promoted and should not be encouraged to seek the promotion. They were to discuss their opposing opinions, demonstrate understanding of the other's positions, and then drop their assigned positions and seek a decision both could support. For participants in the consensus condition, the manager informed them that the personnel office has a history of discussing decisions in which everyone expresses their own views and that they would receive chances in the lottery depending on how openly they discussed their own views. They were given rules that indicated that they should demonstrate their understanding of the other's position, and reach a decision both could support.

The manager then asked the participants if they had any questions, and gave them time to prepare for the discussion. Once ready, they began. The manager at three set times reminded them of the decisions they were to make and the rules by which they were to reach these decisions. After 25 minutes, or when the participants indicated they were ready, the manager had them

complete the decision form. Then the experimenter re-entered, separated them, and had them complete the post experimental questionnaire that had the remaining dependent variables and induction check measures.

Dependent Variables

There are three sets of dependent variables in this study. The first set measures epistemic curiousity. The participants indicated on 7 point scales the extent they felt informed about the problem under discussion, their understanding of it, and how well they believe they have examined the problem. Participants who indicated they felt uninformed, not understanding, and had doubts were considered to have epistemic curiousity.

During the discussion, the manager acted as an observer. The observation sheet indicated the skills Vivien Burns needed to perform her present job as documented in the case. The sheet also contained skills that Vivien Burns would need to perform her new job successfully and whether she had these skills, did not have them, or there was insufficient evidence to make a conclusion. The observer noted every time one of the group members correctly noted whether she had or did not have a skill necessary for her present or possible new job.

The outcomes of the decision were the quality of the decision, acceptance of it, and interpersonal attitudes. The Vivien Burns case describes an appealing, hardworking woman who would seem to warrant promotion. However, a thorough examination reveals that the new job is not one that really fits her abilities or her needs. The decisions not to offer her the position, and to discourage her from taking the position, were considered

as being high quality. A high quality decision was scored as 1 and a low quality decision as 0. These were added together for the measure of the quality of the two decisions. The participants also indicated their acceptance of the decisions by rating on 7 point scale the confidence they had in them. They also rated on 7 point scales the extent they believed their relationship with the other was cooperative, and their liking for their team member.

Confederates

Two male and two female undergraduates served as confederates. They were given 12 hours of training in how to structure the three different methods of making decisions. They were observed in a pilot study with four participants and given feedback to insure their competence in filling their role. Each confederate was used in all three conditions.

Results

Analysis of variance was conducted on the induction checks and dependent measures and follow-up t tests were used when the analysis yielded a significant finding. Participants in the concurrence seeking condition rated on a 7 point scale that their manager discouraged them from expressing opposing opinions ($M=3.21$) compared to participants in the controversy ($M=4.73$) and participants in the consensus ($M=4.84$) conditions ($F(2,26)=6.98$, $p<.01$). Participants in the consensus condition rated that their manager encouraged them to express their own views openly ($M=4.92$) compared to participants in the controversy ($M=4.08$) and participants in the concurrence seeking ($M=3.46$) conditions ($F(2,78)=4.19$, $p<.05$). These results indicate that the experimental conditions were created.

Insert Table 1 about here

The Data (Table 1) indicate that participants in the controversy condition were the most curious about the decision. They indicated that they felt less well informed and that they understood the problem less well than did participants in the consensus and concurrence seeking conditions. Controversy participants were also less certain that they had examined the problem thoroughly than the participants in the other conditions.

Observations of the decision making revealed differences in the thoroughness of examination of the problem. The controversy condition participants were observed to correctly evaluate the skills Vivien Burns had relevant to her present job and also to evaluate correctly her skills relevant to completing her new job successfully than did participants in the concurrence seeking and consensus conditions.

Results indicate no significant difference due to condition on the measure of the quality of decision. There was a significant difference in the acceptance of the decision. Consensus participants rated that they felt more confident about their decision than did those in the concurrence seeking and the controversy conditions. The conditions also affected interpersonal attitudes. Concurrence seeking participants thought that their relationship with their team member was more cooperative than participants in the other

conditions and rated that they liked the team member more than did participants in the controversy condition.

Discussion

In addition to selecting who is to make the decision, and what general process will be used, managers can affect the manner group members use to make a decision and thereby the processes and outcomes of decision making. Managers who structured controversy had group members who felt uncertain about their positions and the problem. They evaluated the skills needed for the old job and the proposed job thoroughly. Groups whose managers structured consensus or concurrence seeking tended to feel confident about their knowledge, the decision itself, understanding, and did not explore the problem in much depth. However, the controversy participants did not arrive at a higher quality decision than did those in the other conditions.

Results lend some support to the idea that concurrence seeking interferes with group decision making. Participants in this condition indicated that they felt confident about their knowledge and decisions even though they did not explore it in depth. They did come to like each other and to assume their relationships was cooperative. Concurrence seeking appears to be part of groupthink (Janis, 1972) that can promote relationships but not the decision making capabilities of the group. Consensus decision making did not have the same effects as controversy. Persons who sought to speak their own views and reach an accord they could accept felt they understood the issue and were confident about their decisions even though observations indicate that they had not examined the issue carefully.

Contrary to our hypothesis, controversy did not promote a higher quality decision than concurrence seeking or consensus. This result is especially unexpected because controversy participants were observed to explore the problem in depth. A possible explanation of this result is that controversy, in that it creates epistemic curiousity, may facilitate a high quality decision only when the persons involved have the opportunity to search for new information to satisfy their uncertainty. Participants in this study did not have the opportunity to ask more questions or in other ways gather more information (other than re-reading the case), to help them make the decisions.

Results of this study are of course limited by its operations and sample. Previous studies suggest that these results have some generalizability. Groups that encourage controversy have been found to feel uncertain and explore issues more deeply rather than assume that they have the right position (Maier, 1970; Tjosvold and Deemer, 1980). This study suggests how managers can structure controversy through assigning different group members opposing views and allowing them to defend their assigned positions. This controversy approach does seem to be a more reliable way to generate exploration of the problem than just encouraging individuals to express their own positions. Vroom and Yetton (1973) have stated that when conflict among subordinates exists, the decision methods used should allow interaction among the subordinates. Results of this study indicate that group members who have conflicting opinions and encouraged controversy are more curious about the problem and explore the problem in depth.

Table 1

Decision Making Method

	Concurrence Seeking	Controversy	Consensus	F
Feel Informed	5.93	5.15	5.92	3.69*
Understand the Problem	5.79	5.12	6.11	5.31**
Examination of Problem	5.64	5.04	6.11	7.29**
Present Job and Skills Evaluated	2.92	4.95	3.38	7.27**
New Job and Skills Evaluated	2.95	3.27	2.08	3.46*
Quality of Decision	.67	.69	.74	ns
Acceptance of Decision	5.85	5.65	6.53	5.55**
Cooperative Relationship	6.39	5.35	5.27	4.71**
Liking	6.29	5.58	5.96	3.58*

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

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